History

Located just northwest of the modern day India, Afghanistan has long served as the northwestern border and gateway for the Indian civilization. Various Indian emperors have ruled the region over the last 3,000 years and its close relations with the rest of India have been well documented by historians.

The Hindukush Mountains in the west and Himalayas in the north and northeast served as the borders for India; Afghanistan was an integral part of the Indian kingdoms at various times during its history.

In the fourth century C.E., Taxila and Kandahar formed important centers of commerce and education for the empire of Ashoka the Great. In fact, Taxila was one of the first universities to be founded in India. In those days, the entire region of today's Afghanistan and northern Pakistan was called Gandhar, after which an important stream of Indian art—painting and sculpture—has been named. The area was also an important center for Buddhism in its early days and several ancient statues of Buddha and other artifacts of Buddhism are still found in the region.

The Indian influence continued, though on and off, until modern times when Sikh kings ruled large chunks of Afghanistan. In fact, the famous Panjsher Valley in the northern Afghanistan is derived from Punjabi and means the Valley of Five Lions.

Afghanistan also served as the gateway for invasions into India, especially the invaders from central and west Asia. In 328 C.E., Alexander the Great entered the territory of present-day Afghanistan to capture Bactria (present-day Balkh). Invasions by the Scythians, White Huns and Turks followed in succeeding centuries. In 642 C.E., Arabs invaded the entire region and introduced Islam.

Arab rule quickly gave way to the Persians, who controlled the area until the Turkic Ghaznavids' conquest in 998 C.E. Specifically, Mahmud of Ghazni (998-1030) consolidated the conquests of his predecessors and turned Ghazni into a great cultural center, as well as a base for frequent forays into India. Following Mahmud's short-lived dynasty, various princes attempted to rule sections of the country until the Mongol invasion of 1219. The Mongol invasion, led by Genghis Khan, resulted in the destruction of many cities, including Herat, Ghazni and Balkh, and the despoliation of fertile agricultural areas.

Following Genghis Khan's death in 1227 C.E., a succession of petty chieftains and princes struggled for supremacy until late in the 14th century, when one of his descendants, Tamerlane, incorporated Afghanistan into his vast empire. Babur, a descendant of Tamerlane and the founder of India's Moghul Dynasty at the beginning of the 16th century, made Kabul the capital of an Afghan principality, bringing Afghanistan back into the Indian orbit, a state that continued more or less uninterrupted until late 19th century.

In 1747, after the demise of the Moghul Dynasty, Ahmad Shah Durrani took charge in Delhi. He is often called the founder of the modern day Afghanistan. Throughout his reign, Durrani consolidated chieftainships, petty principalities and fragmented provinces into one country. His rule extended from Mashhad in the west to Kashmir and Delhi in the east, and from the Amu Darya (Oxus) River in the north to the Arabian Sea in the south. All of Afghanistan's rulers, until the 1978 Marxist coup d'etat, were from Durrani's Pashtun tribal confederation, and all were members of that tribe's Mohammadzai clan after 1818.

Conflict between the expanding British and Russian empires significantly influenced Afghanistan during the 19th century. British concern over Russian advances in Central Asia and growing influence in Persia culminated in the two Anglo-Afghan Wars.

The first (1839-42) resulted not only in the destruction of a British army, but is remembered today as an example of the ferocity of Afghan resistance to foreign rule. The second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-80) was sparked by Amir Shir Ali's refusal to accept a British mission in Kabul. This conflict brought Amir Abdur Rahman to the Afghan throne. During his reign (1880-1901), the British and Russians officially established the boundaries of what would become modern Afghanistan. The British retained effective control over Kabul's foreign affairs.

Afghanistan remained neutral during World War I, despite German encouragement of anti-British feelings and Afghan rebellion along the borders of British India. The Afghan king's policy of neutrality was not universally popular within the country, however.

In 1919, members of an anti-British movement assassinated Habibullah, Abdur Rahman's son and successor. His third son, Amanullah, regained control of Afghanistan's foreign policy after launching the third Anglo-Afghan War with an attack on India in the same year. During the ensuing conflict, the war-weary British relinquished their control over Afghan foreign affairs by signing the Treaty of Rawalpindi in August 1919. In commemoration of this event, Afghans celebrate Aug. 19 as Independence Day.

King Amanullah (1919-29) moved to end his country's traditional isolation in the years following the third Anglo-Afghan War. He established diplomatic relations with most major countries and, following a 1927 tour of Europe and Turkey (the latter of which had seen modernization and secularization under Ataturk), introduced several reforms intended to modernize the country.

Some of these reforms, such as the abolition of the traditional Muslim veil for women and the opening of a number of co-educational schools, quickly alienated many tribal and religious leaders. The weakness of the army under Amanullah further jeopardized his position. He was forced to abdicate in January 1929 after Kabul fell to forces led by Bacha-i-Saqao, a Tajik brigand. Prince Nadir Khan, a cousin of Amanullah's, in turn defeated Bacha-i-Saqao in October of the same year. With considerable Pashtun tribal support, Khan was declared King Nadir Shah. Four years later, however, a Kabul student, seeking revenge, assassinated him.

Mohammad Zahir Shah, Nadir Khan's 19-year-old son, succeeded to the throne and reigned from 1933 to 1973. In 1964, King Zahir Shah promulgated a liberal constitution providing for a two-chamber legislature to which the king appointed one-third of the deputies. The people elected another third, and provincial assemblies selected the remainder indirectly. Although Zahir's "experiment in democracy" produced few lasting reforms, it permitted the growth of unofficial extremist parties of both left and right. This group included the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which had close ideological ties to the Soviet Union.

In 1967, the PDPA split into two major rival factions: the Khalq (Masses) faction headed by Nur Muhammad Taraki and supported by the military, and the Parcham (Banner) faction led by Babrak Karmal. The split reflected deep ethnic, class and ideological divisions within Afghan society.

Zahir's cousin, Sardar Mohammad Daoud, served as his prime minister from 1953 to 1963. During his tenure as prime minister, Daoud solicited military and economic assistance from both Washington and Moscow and introduced controversial social policies. Daoud's alleged support for the creation of a Pashtun state in the Pakistan- Afghan border area heightened tensions with Pakistan and eventually resulted in Daoud's dismissal in March 1963.

Amid charges of corruption and malfeasance against the royal family and poor economic conditions caused by the severe 1971-72 drought, former Prime Minister Daoud seized power in

a military coup on July 17, 1973. Daoud abolished the monarchy, abrogated the 1964 constitution, and declared Afghanistan a republic with himself as its first president and prime minister. His attempts to carry out badly needed economic and social reforms met with little success, and the new constitution promulgated in February 1977 failed to quell chronic political instability.

Seeking to exploit the mounting disaffection of the populace, the PDPA reunified with Moscow's support. On April 27-28, 1978, the PDPA initiated a bloody coup that resulted in the overthrow and death of Daoud and most of his family. Nur Muhammad Taraki, secretary general of the PDPA, became president of the Revolutionary Council and prime minister of the newly established Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.

Opposition to the Marxist government emerged almost immediately. This reaction was largely due to the fact that the PDPA brutally imposed a Marxist-style "reform" program during its first 18 months of rule, which ran counter to deeply rooted Islamic traditions.

Decrees advocating the abolition of usury (lending money and charging exorbitant interest rates), changes in marriage customs, and land reform were particularly misunderstood and upsetting to highly conservative villagers. In addition, thousands of members of the traditional elite, the religious establishment, and the intelligentsia were imprisoned, tortured or murdered. Conflicts within the PDPA also surfaced early and resulted in exiles, purges, mass imprisonment and executions.

By the summer of 1978, a major revolt in the Nuristan region of eastern Afghanistan spread into a countrywide insurgency. In September 1979, Hafizullah Amin, who had earlier been the prime minister and minister of defense, seized power from Taraki after a palace shootout. Over the next two months, instability plagued Amin's regime as he moved against perceived enemies in the PDPA. By December, party morale was crumbling, and the insurgency was growing.

The Soviet Union moved quickly to take advantage of the April 1978 coup. In December 1978, Moscow signed a new bilateral treaty of friendship and cooperation with Afghanistan, and the Soviet military assistance program increased significantly. The regime's survival increasingly was dependent upon Soviet military equipment and advisers, and over time, the Afghan army began to collapse.

By October 1979, however, relations between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union were tense as Hafizullah Amin refused to take Soviet advice on how to stabilize and consolidate his government. Faced with a deteriorating security situation on Dec. 24, 1979, large numbers of Soviet airborne forces, joining thousands of Soviet troops already on the ground, began to land in Kabul under the pretext of a field exercise. Two days later, these invasion forces killed Hafizullah Amin and installed Babrak Karmal, exiled leader of the Parcham faction, as prime minister. Massive Soviet ground forces invaded from the north on Dec. 27.

Following the invasion, the Karmal regime, although backed by an expeditionary force of about 120,000 Soviet troops, was unable to establish authority outside Kabul. As much as 80 percent of the countryside, including parts of Herat and Kandahar eluded effective government control.

An overwhelming majority of Afghans opposed the communist regime, either actively or passively. Afghan "mujahidin" (freedom fighters) made it almost impossible for the regime to maintain a system of local government outside major urban centers. Poorly armed at first, in 1984 the "mujahidin" began receiving substantial assistance in the form of weapons and training from the United States and other outside powers.

In May 1985, the seven principal Peshawar-based guerrilla organizations formed an alliance to coordinate their political and military operations against the Soviet occupation. Late in 1985, the "mujahidin" were active in and around Kabul, launching rocket attacks and assassinating high

government officials. The failure of the Soviet Union to win over a significant number of Afghan collaborators, or to rebuild a viable Afghan army, forced it to bear an increasing responsibility for fighting the resistance and for civilian administration.

Soviet and popular displeasure with the Karmal regime led to its demise in May 1986. Muhammad Najibullah, former chief of the Afghan secret police (KHAD), replaced Karmal. Najibullah had established a reputation for brutal efficiency during his tenure as KHAD chief. As prime minister, though, Najibullah was ineffective and highly dependent on Soviet support. Undercut by deep-seated divisions within the PDPA, the regime's efforts to broaden its base of support proved futile.

By the mid-1980s, the tenacious Afghan resistance movement, aided by the United States, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and others, was exacting a high price from the Soviets, both militarily within Afghanistan, and also by souring the U.S.S.R.'s relations with much of the Western and Islamic world. Although informal negotiations for a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan had been underway since 1982, it was not until 1988 that the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan, with the United States and Soviet Union serving as guarantors, signed an agreement settling the major differences between them.

The agreement, known as the Geneva Accords, included five major documents. The accords called for U.S. and Soviet non-interference in the internal affairs of Pakistan and Afghanistan; the right of refugees to return to Afghanistan without fear of persecution or harassment; and, most importantly, a timetable that ensured full Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan by Feb. 15, 1989. About 14,500 Soviet and an estimated one million Afghan lives were lost between 1979 and the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

Significantly, the "mujahidin" were neither party to the negotiations, nor to the 1988 agreement, and consequently, they refused to accept the terms of the accords. As a result, civil war did not end with the Soviet withdrawal, which was completed as scheduled in February 1989. Instead, it escalated. Najibullah's regime, though failing to win popular support, territory or international recognition, was able to remain in power until 1992.

The Soviet-supported Najibullah regime did not collapse until the defection of Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostam and his Uzbek militia in March 1992. As the victorious "mujahidin" entered Kabul to assume control over the city and the central government, a new round of internecine fighting began between the various militias, which had coexisted only uneasily during the Soviet occupation. With the demise of their common enemy, the militias' ethnic, clan, religious and personality differences surfaced, and the civil war continued.

Seeking to resolve these differences, the leaders of the Peshawar-based "mujahidin" groups agreed in mid-April of 1992 to establish a 51-member interim Islamic Jihad Council to assume power in Kabul. Moderate leader, Professor Sibghatullah Mojaddedi, was to chair the council for three months, after which a 10-member leadership council composed of "mujahidin" leaders and presided over by the head of the Jamiat-i-Islami, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani, was to be set up for a period of four months. During this period, a Loya Jirga, or grand council of Afghan elders, would convene and designate an interim administration to hold power for up to a year, pending elections.

In May 1992, however, Rabbani prematurely formed the leadership council, undermining Mojaddedi's fragile authority. In June, Mojaddedi surrendered power to the Leadership Council, which then elected Rabbani president. Heavy fighting broke out in August 1992 in Kabul between forces loyal to President Rabbani and rival factions, particularly those who supported Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami.

After Rabbani convened a highly controversial council to extend his tenure in December 1992, fighting in the capital flared up in January and February 1993. The Islamabad Accord, signed in

March 1993, which appointed Hekmatyar prime minister, failed to have a lasting effect. A follow-up agreement, the Jalalabad Accord, called for the militias to be disarmed but was never fully implemented.

Through 1993, Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami forces, allied with the Shi'a Hezb-i-Wahdat militia, clashed intermittently with Rabbani and Masood's Jamiat forces. Cooperating with Jamiat were militants of Sayyaf's Ittehad-i-Islami and, periodically, troops loyal to ethnic Uzbek strongman, Abdul Rashid Dostam. On Jan. 1, 1994, Dostam switched sides, precipitating large-scale fighting in Kabul and in the northern provinces, causing thousands of civilian casualties in Kabul and elsewhere and creating a new wave of displaced people and refugees.

In late 1994, a force called the Taliban, consisting of primarily Pashtun refugees, came to the fore in Afghanistan, intending to install an Islamic government. The group systematically eliminated all other factions and gradually took control of many of Afghanistan's provinces.

Initially, many Afghans welcomed the Taliban as a force to reunite the country. Many opinions were changed over the course of the year, however, as harsh punishment (including executions) was employed to enforce strict conformity to fundamentalist Islam.

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